

**North Carolina Innovation Center**

State CIO Office Special Recognition

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## **Executive Summary:**

North Carolina's Innovation Center (iCenter) was established in 2013 as a proving ground for information technology solutions. The Governor and State CIO announced the concept in April of 2013 and officially launched the iCenter in October of that year. The Innovation Center was pieced together from existing resources, with unused space in a State-owned building transformed into a modern, collaborative workspace filled with potential technology solutions on demo from vendors.

State agencies, chief information officers, private industry and students collaborate at the iCenter in a "try before you buy" approach to testing technology systems before the state invests in them. The Innovation Center concept also fosters teamwork among agency IT professionals, who are now working together as a statewide enterprise rather than operating as individual businesses. The iCenter was recognized as a 2015 "Bright Idea" by the Ash Center at Harvard University, and was named a State IT Program of the Year 2015 by State Scoop.

North Carolina's commitment to an "anytime, anywhere, any device" strategy is based on the premise that doing business with the government should be as easy and cost-effective as checking a sports score or shopping on a smartphone. This made the evaluation of digital and mobile solutions a natural fit for the Innovation Center. Though common in the private sector, government has traditionally been slow to adopt a focus on the consumer.

With the citizen as the customer in mind, the iCenter has successfully engaged in projects such as Mobile Field Application Proof-of Concepts, Immersive Virtual Collaboration and Communication, Customer Self-Service kiosks, Endpoint Computing Testing, and Form Factor testing. During a Microsoft Office 365 Proof of Concept conducted through the iCenter, the Microsoft Office Productivity Suite was tested and will be complete with a statewide 60,000 user migration by the end of the fiscal year. An ongoing project related to testing workspace design models that promote collaboration and demonstrate the integration of furniture into technology.

Two cross-agency projects are currently underway that focus on the state's mobile and web presence and both are being run through the iCenter. The Digital Commons project is establishing a unified look and feel to all Cabinet Agency websites and simplifying the content management process so the sites can be kept current by administrators with limited technical expertise. . The second web project will create a common portal for businesses, eliminating the current need to visit multiple websites to access all of the services that are currently available online.

The challenge for the iCenter going forward will be to maintain its operations amid high demand from agencies, with minimal staff and no dedicated funding from the State.

## **Business Problem and Solution Description**

The State of North Carolina has historically purchased information technology systems without adequately analyzing the business problem an agency needs to solve or sufficiently defining project requirements. Without establishing clear expectations up front, IT projects routinely ran over budget and behind schedule and did not deliver services to citizens as planned. A state audit of 84 past IT projects emphasized the need for reform, finding that actual costs were more than twice (\$356M) the original estimates and took 65% (389 days) longer to complete than estimated.

North Carolina's State Chief Information Officer and agency CIOs were already establishing the iCenter at the audit was released, so the State to prototype and test solutions before the procurement process to better define requirements and inform purchasing decisions. The State's Chief Digital Officer – as position established in 2014 for the first time in North Carolina – and other IT leaders created an R&D lab setting similar to MIT's Media Lab and Stanford's d.school. Technology leaders came together to test solutions before the State invested in them, and eliminated potential solutions that that did not meet agency needs. The Innovation Center also launched partnerships with the vendor community and state universities to harness local talent and technology from the Research Triangle park area. By empowering state employees to better define their business needs, the iCenter team hopes to enable a cultural change within State government. Agency leaders bring their business problems and needs to the State CIO, their State Agency colleagues, and the iCenter staff, who work collectively to engage vendor partners. The collaborative environment allows us to recognize and target opportunities for cross-agency solutions to business problems, which ultimately engages the agencies with one another and saves the state time and resources.

## **Significance**

The iCenter concept evolved from conversations between the Governor and State CIO early on in the administration. The project had buy-in and support from other Cabinet-level leaders and their agency IT professionals. The iCenter sits at street level of a new, LEED-certified State government building and encourages teamwork in a modern and moveable workspace. However, the Innovation Center is not just a physical space. It is also a concept that extends across State agencies as they take a new approach to testing and investing in IT solutions.

## **Benefit of the Project**

Since the formal opening of the iCenter in October of 2013, State employees and Agency CIOs have tested more than \$7M worth of technology on demonstration from vendors at no cost to state government. Current iCenter initiatives and projects include data visualization, open web delivery platforms, Sensor POC, Bluetooth low

energy/beacon technology and wearables. Collaborations with students and education entities include design and website development with North Carolina State University, and internships for high school and college students. From these collaborations we have also been involved in a technology and furniture integration project with Knightdale High School as well as a project partner with the Masters in Global Innovation program at North Carolina State University for increasing awareness and operational efficiency at the iCenter.

Test cases conducted through the Innovation Center have already allowed agency Chief Information Officers to identify and evaluate potential solutions and make better-informed decisions about how tax dollars are spent. After successful pilot projects involving actual users, rollouts of Office 365 and hosted virtual desktop technology are underway. As the iCenter's mission continues to evolve, the State of North Carolina expects to realize additional cost savings while delivering more efficient and effective services to the citizens it serves.